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In Mr. Hiyoshi's Building

I arrived in Tokyo on a warm September night carrying one suitcase stuffed with everything I owned, including a package of chocolate cookies from my parents, who worried that cookies could not be found in Japan. Altogether, my possessions and I did not weigh much. In those days I was stick-thin and feared the anchoring gravity of ownership. The airplane ticket had cost half my savings.

My wallet contained no credit cards and maybe two hundred dollars, enough to keep me fed and sheltered in Tokyo for a couple of days. Why Japan? Why this exorbitant capital of consumerism when I had so little? At twenty-two, I aspired to see the world on a young man's terms. To live in a different country every year—that was my goal. In my ravenous greed for travel, I had scorned all concern for the future and snubbed most practicalities. And what did *practical* mean beyond feeding a hunger for perpetual movement?

In the grip of this vague but feverish notion of adventure, I bought my one-way ticket at the end of summer and said goodbye to my mother and father. I told everyone that I would be gone for a year, but in fact I had no thought of returning, no vision of the journey's end. Back then I had only lightweight beginnings and dreams of the next country. The single certainty awaiting me was a job teaching English to Japanese executives, men twice my age, who ran powerful companies from enormous concrete headquarters. This was the early 1980s, when Japan was buying up prime real estate around the globe.

Since permanent housing had not yet been arranged, I spent my first two nights in Tokyo at a middling hotel. On the third day, I took a taxi to a two-story building in which my employer, a private language school, had found an apartment for me. My school had provided the first month's rent and some meager living expenses to be repaid over time, along with a complicated fold-out map of Tokyo and, written on a scrap of paper, the address and the name of my landlord: Hiyoshi.

When the taxi reached the apartment building in the Setagaya district, a bald, stocky man and a woman in a floral print dress were standing outside. Upon seeing that the passenger in the taxi was a *gaijin*, a foreigner, they smiled, and as I got out of the car they bowed deeply. I tried, awkwardly, to return the gesture before setting down my suitcase.

"Rompf-san!" the man said. "Welcome to my place!"

My landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Hiyoshi, had called the hotel several times to keep track of my check-out. When a man at the front desk told them I was finally in a taxi, they went outside to wait for me.

Mr. Hiyoshi asked me to follow him, and soon he was unlocking the door of an apartment. In Japan, you always walk at least one step up into a house after taking off your shoes, rising above the lower, soiled plane to enter the clean, sacred place of home. I had read about the ritual in a guide to Japanese

culture. After Mr. Hiyoshi opened the door, I immediately removed my shoes, leaving them at the threshold. Delighted that I knew the routine, Mr. and Mrs. Hiyoshi smiled as they took off their shoes, too.

As I stepped up into the apartment, my heart sank. The space seemed only slightly larger than a walk-in closet. I desperately tried to mask my surprise while the Hiyoshis, who were clearly proud of their building, beamed as if they had just unveiled a luxurious penthouse.

"Your room, special for you," Mr. Hiyoshi said. "Special for *Americans*."

Mr. Hiyoshi adored Americans and nothing seemed to thrill him more than having one as a tenant. Numerous *gaijin* had lived in his apartments—British, Canadian, French—but for him, Americans bestowed a distinct cachet.

My landlord, his wife and I stood with our bodies pressed together in the area beyond the front door. This was the kitchen, which was equipped with an ultra-mini refrigerator for a quart of milk and some eggs, a stainless steel sink, a slim cabinet for four plates, and a single gas-powered burner. Mr. Hiyoshi turned a switch. "Gas!" he said, pointing at the sapphire flame. Then he opened a door to reveal a bathroom capsule whose toilet, sink, and combination tub-and-shower were molded from a single contiguous piece of plastic. Since only one person could enter at a time, Mr. Hiyoshi squeezed in first, turned on the faucet full-force to demonstrate how hot the water could become, then backed out and nudged me in to feel it myself.

"Very hot water, Rompf-san!" Mr. Hiyoshi said. "Good for winter!" His wife, eager to have her turn showing off the apartment, pointed to a bamboo-latticed sliding door. She opened and closed it several times, presumably to demonstrate the durability of construction. Finally she left it open and said, in a sweet, beckoning voice, "Please." I assumed that she wanted me to try the door for myself, so I slid it back and forth, but Mrs. Hiyoshi appeared baffled. After speaking to her husband in Japanese, she turned to me and said, "Please go in." She wanted me to enter the main living area separated from the kitchen by the bamboo door, a single small room with sand-colored walls. I stepped in. Mr. Hiyoshi followed me and suddenly dropped to his knees. He began jabbing his index finger at the floor.

"New, Rompf-san, new!" he said.

I could smell the newness in the air, a hint of freshly mowed lawn emanating from the floor of tightly woven straw—the *tatami*, a word formed from two characters, or *kanji*: one that means *rice*, and the other *stitch* or *knot*.

All apartments and homes in Japan are measured not by square footage but by *tatami*. "How many *tatami* is your room?" my friends and students would ask. My room had six *tatami*, an area of about a hundred square feet where I slept, ate, read, prepared for class, wrote letters, did push-ups, served tea and, in December, decorated a foot-high potted pine tree, my Christmas *bonsai*. Although six mats initially seemed small, I found out later that many young

Tokyoites occupy apartments with only three or four *tatami*—fifty or sixty square feet.

"It's very nice," I said. But that wasn't the right word for the apartment. The Hiyoshis were nice, and as far as I could tell they would be lovely landlords. The apartment, on the other hand, was excruciatingly small, yet it was also a marvel of reductive engineering, an artful shrinking of ordinary domestic things, all grounded by woven straw and cast in sublime calmness. It seemed as light as I felt, and I could see myself living there indefinitely. I also saw how easy it would be to leave.

Bowing together deeply, the Hiyoshis said, "Ah-so!"

Mr. Hiyoshi spoke more English than his wife, and I could not yet utter a complex sentence in Japanese, but we quickly came to an agreement. I would rent apartment #101 for \$240 per month, electricity and water included, and because Mr. Hiyoshi loved Americans I would not have to pay "key money," a nonrefundable sum equal to one month's rent, which new tenants customarily provided as a gesture of gratitude for the privilege of living in a landlord's building. Mr. and Mrs. Hiyoshi bowed again before putting on their shoes. As they were leaving, my new landlord said, "Thank you, Rompf-san!"

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I took account of my new home. Mr. Hiyoshi had placed in the room a small, low table, and in the center of it sat a bowl of oranges that looked as if they had been hand-polished. Attached to the underside of the table was an electric heater; in winter I could plug it in, throw a quilted blanket over the tabletop, and sit with my legs tucked under the tent of warming air. This invention, known as a *kotatsu*, was my only source of heat during the months when the temperature often dropped below freezing, causing ice to form in the kitchen sink. Despite the humid summers—when I would lie on the *tatami* in my briefs, sponging my face and chest with ice-water—Japan in my memory is a cold country dotted with snow-fringed temples. Many mornings I woke up to my breath heaving shots of steam, and on the most frigid nights I slept with half my body cramped under the *kotatsu*. During power surges, the heater singed the hair on my legs.

Since my apartment did not yet have a *futon*, I slept on the *tatami* that first night. The next day, after consulting a guide for *gaijin* living in Tokyo, I took the subway across the city to a Salvation Army thrift shop, whose inventory included embroidered kimono, fine porcelain tea sets, lacquer trays with gold etching, ivory carvings, antique swords, and beautiful Chinese pottery—nothing like the Salvation Army stores in the United States. I bought two barely used *futon* for ten dollars, rolled them up and got back on the subway, hefting the bulky mattresses on my shoulders and dropping them several times. Halfway through the trip back to Mr. Hiyoshi's building, I noticed that every passenger on the subway was staring at me in horror. Weeks later, after telling this story to my students, I learned that toting around one's *futon* on the subway was akin to strolling naked through Tokyo.

My home came into being: *kotatsu*, two *futon* stacked on new *tatami*, a tea kettle and skillet bought from a neighborhood shop, four plates and four cups, and a bag of plastic chopsticks. Along with its compactness, my apartment's other defining quality was what it conspicuously lacked: telephone, television, stereo, sofa, chairs, shelves, desk, a western-style bed. I did not need any of these. I called my mother and father from a local telegraph office. Once, when my school needed to reach me in an emergency, I was sent a telegram. The postman who delivered it unfolded a long strip of paper with phonetic Japanese characters spelling out English words. He read the message slowly, carefully pronouncing each word: "Your class is canceled today, please stay home."

With few teaching assignments and little money during the first few months, I spent most of my time in Hiyoshi's building. I read, wrote, studied Japanese, and cooked simple meals. Often I did not leave my apartment for days except to take long walks in the Setagaya district, meandering down uncharted alleys and paths. In the beginning, when I did not know my way around, I often became completely disoriented and wandered until I came upon a familiar marker. One afternoon, I was forced to admit to myself that I was hopelessly lost. In a mild state of panic I presented myself to one of the district police kiosks, where I wrote my address on a scrap of paper. An officer looked at the address and said, "Ah, Hiyoshi-san!" He picked up the telephone receiver and dialed a number from memory. Except for the word *gaijin*, I could not understand what he was saying. Minutes after he had finished the call, the police officer blurted "Hiyoshi-san!"

Turning around, I saw my landlord striding up the street. He grinned as he led me back home. "Tokyo big, Rompf-san!" he said. "But if you get lost, I find you."

At least once each week Mr. Hiyoshi knocked at my door. "Good afternoon, Rompf-san," he'd say. "Please excuse me for bothering you."

"Come in Hiyoshi-san," I said, and soon he was out of his shoes and stepping up into my apartment.

"Are you busy today?"

Usually I was not.

"Is my apartment too small for you?"

He asked that question on every visit.

"Maybe you want a bigger place—maybe a place in Roppongi! *Very* big, but *very* expensive." Roppongi is a district where wealthy foreigners and Japanese businessmen live in deluxe apartments high above the noisy, nightclub-studded streets. Fearing that an American standard of bigness had been compromised, Mr. Hiyoshi offered recompense in food and conversation. He brought me sacks of crisp Fuji apples, rice crackers, slices of delicate white cake, ginger and tamarind candies, savory dried squid, and the chocolate

cookies that my father thought could not be found in Japan. My favorite treat was *mochi*, sweet glutinous rice pounded with mallets until it turns into a smooth dense paste. I made green tea for everything. "I'm very happy here, Hiyoshi-san," I said. And it was true. I was content in my room and never considered looking for a larger place with amenities. While starting to earn and save money, I resisted buying presumed necessities—a telephone, for example. My apartment was a quiet reprieve from the eternally bright, boisterous streets of Tokyo, a pocket of silence in a universe that seemed to grow noisier by the minute.

I kept my room immaculately clean and free of extraneous objects. Yesterday's newspaper, if left piled in a corner, seemed like a garbage heap, while a minor cobweb could assume huge proportions. Socks scattered on the floor became an eyesore. There was one closet and I used it as the receptacle for papers, dirty clothes on one shelf and clean on another, books, maps, and anything else that I did not want visible. The walls remained bare. I swept the *tatami* frequently, as if sweeping were a requisite to survival, and on sunny days I draped my two *futon* over the railing outside my window to air them out. In Japan you were not supposed to carry a futon on the subway, but you could hang them outside and beat them with a baseball bat in a fierce exorcism of dust.

I spent much of the winter reading *Crime and Punishment* with my legs tucked under the *kotatsu*. A wool ski cap, leather gloves, thermal underwear, and a scarf failed to keep me warm. *Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!* Everything but the cold, I thought, as Dostoevsky's words injected a chill into my bones. I boiled water for green tea and drank it scalding hot. I boiled more water and held my gloved hands against the kettle. One snowy night I boiled water and poured it into the tiny bathtub, then added hot tap water. I soaked with my knees bent to my chin, then barely dried myself before sprinting for my position beneath the *kotatsu*. I did not move before falling asleep.

In my room I practiced writing Japanese characters on pages from the *Japan Times*, wrote the beginnings of stories but never the endings. I scribbled off long letters to my mother and father. Most of my classes were scheduled for early in the morning or at night. In the middle of the day, I could take naps or long walks. Every winter evening, around six or seven o'clock, a man pushed a cart through the neighborhood, peddling fresh-baked yams from a portable oven. To announce himself, he sang out, "Yakiiii-imooooo." I'd buy one *yaki-imo*, poke it open with a chopstick, and watch the starchy heat obscure the single window in my room. I ate the yam slowly as the man's haunting voice traveled up and down the narrow streets. I thought, despite my constant shiver, that I might live in this country for a very long time.

Once a month when rent was due, I rang my landlord's doorbell. Mrs. Hiyoshi always greeted me and led me into her living room, where she

promptly served tea and a platter of quartered oranges or sliced pears. Her husband's duty was to sit and talk with me, and at the end of our visit I would leave an envelope containing my rent money on the table. "How is teaching, Rompf-san?" Mr. Hiyoshi asked. "You work too hard! Are you happy in Japan?" I never understood how he formed the idea that I worked too hard, especially during the first few months when I was teaching only a few hours each week. Maybe he had gazed through my window as I read, practiced writing *kanji* and prepared for my classes. "Rompf-san, you must have a vacation!" While Mr. Hiyoshi and I chatted, his wife sat on the edge of her seat, pushing the plate of fruit toward me. "Please, please," is all she ever said, trying to get me to eat. Neither of them would touch the food until I had taken a bite first.

In contrast to my room, the Hiyoshis' apartment was extravagantly appointed. Scrolls of wispy calligraphy adorned the walls, knick-knacks lined several shelves, and a coffee table was positioned between the sofa and two chairs. Their living room, no larger than eight or ten *tatami*, had been artfully crammed and seemed to hold almost twenty *tatami* of possessions. During each rent visit, I eventually began to feel agitated and claustrophobic, and I wondered if living in my landlord's apartment might cause a kind of temporary madness. How did the Hiyoshis avoid getting into each other's way? Where did *they* stretch out on steamy summer afternoons?

After rent visits, I surveyed my room to see if there was anything that could be removed—old class notes, a nearly empty box of soy crackers—and if there was nothing more to purge I swept every inch of the *tatami*, scrubbed the bathroom, and opened the door and window, even during cold weather. The clean emptiness cleared my head and made me feel physically lighter. Since a sparse, spotless room could be vacated quickly, my particular asceticism ministered to a need for imminent mobility, which I took to be a calling.

One afternoon, Mr. Hiyoshi brought me some dried salted plums. I prepared cups of tea and we sat down as usual at my low table. I could see that something was on my landlord's mind. He skipped our standard small talk about the weather and my inclination to work too hard.

"Rompf-san," he said. "I will tell you my story." He bowed his head slightly and his expression turned uncharacteristically grave. "Please excuse me," he said. I didn't know why he chose this day, this moment, to tell his story. It had been six or seven months since I moved into his building and perhaps, after so many visits to my room, he had decided that we had sufficiently bonded.

He raised his head and took a sip of tea. Since Mr. Hiyoshi's English was far from fluent, it took some time for him to convey information and for me to ask clarifying questions, but as we sat together for two hours that day, our knees occasionally touching under the table, I gradually pieced together his story. During World War II, Hiyoshi served as an army soldier in the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. He did not see his wife for several years,

and toward the end of the war, when Japan finally surrendered to the Soviet forces that had entered China, he was taken as prisoner by the Russian army and held in a labor camp for nearly two years. During that time, he became extremely ill. Mr. Hiyoshi could not specify in English the exact nature of his illness, but as he pointed to his stomach and his head, he groaned loudly to demonstrate the severity of his condition. "Very bad, Rompf-san, very bad," he said. "And no doctors." He thought he would never again see his wife or Japan. He was near death when, all of a sudden, the Russians began sending Japanese POWs back home. Mr. Hiyoshi was returned to Japan a few months after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His family barely recognized him. He was thin, he could barely walk, and he looked much older than his age, but he was alive and that was enough. He spent weeks recovering in a hospital. The Americans were heroes in the war, Mr. Hiyoshi said, for they had helped to crush the Nazis and liberate the concentration camps. He expressed no bitterness about the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan.

After hearing his story, I realized that Mr. Hiyoshi regarded me as a young man who, being far away from his family and his country, needed to be looked after and cared for. This explained his frequent inquiries about my well-being: did I like living in his building, was the water hot enough, would I care to borrow an extra blanket, did Japanese food make me sick, was I lonely? He considered it his obligation to keep me company on occasion, to ensure that I was eating enough, to call my school when I had come down with a bad cold, and to rescue me from the police kiosk when I became lost. Wherever I traveled in Japan, Mr. Hiyoshi was never far away.

In the spring, my mother and father came to visit me. I had warned them repeatedly about the size of my apartment, reminded them that they'd have to sleep close to the floor in tight quarters, all of us in one room that was smaller than their cozy, cramped den back home. "Don't worry," my mother said, "We don't need much space at all."

A week before they arrived I returned to the Salvation Army to buy two more *futon*. This time I had enough money for a taxi ride back to my apartment. But the *futon* would not fit side-by-side without taking up most of the floor, so I stacked them on top of each other, arranging them perpendicular to my own *futon*. My mother and father would have to sleep together on a surface that was smaller than a twin-sized bed. I also had purchased extra bath towels, as well as some cutlery, knowing that chopsticks would not be viable for two people who held tight to their fork-and-knife ways.

They arrived late in the evening, pale and tired from the trans-Pacific flight. After a taxi delivered us to Mr. Hiyoshi's building, I issued one last warning before opening the door: "Now remember, I told you it wasn't very big." Following my instructions, they removed their shoes and stepped up into the apartment. I flicked on the light and slid open the door separating the

kitchenette from the main room. My mother and father stood silently as their eyes studied the blank walls and the exotic, woven straw floor. Noticing the stacked *futon*, my mother asked, "Is that your . . . *couch*?"

"That's your bed," I said.

"Does it fold out?"

"No, it doesn't."

"It's a bed?"

"For both of you."

When my mother finally gathered the courage to use the bathroom on her first evening in Japan, she began to giggle. "Will you pry me out if I become stuck?" she asked. Her teased hair nearly swept the ceiling, and when she sat down inside the bathroom her knees knocked against the door. That night, and every night when we were not traveling outside Tokyo, my parents slept on the narrow *futon*, their arms holding each other as if they might fall into a deep abyss. The three of us had not slept in the same room since our vacations when I was a child, and never in a room so small.

Staying in Japan longer than a year was untenable. The wanderer's greed ran deep and furious within me, and Mr. Hiyoshi himself seemed to understand this when I announced my intention to leave. We were sitting together once again in my room, drinking ice water and eating chunks of cold pineapple. It was July, and we both were sweating. I was afraid to reveal my decision, afraid to disappoint the landlord who had been a guardian and companion, but when I finally told him, he said, "You are a young man! You go here, go there, and one day you go home." The day I left his building, Mr. Hiyoshi and his wife stood quietly beside me as I waited for a taxi. When it was time to say goodbye, they bowed once more.

I departed Japan carrying one suitcase with all I owned, less the cookies from my parents.

At home, wherever its locus, all my rooms and apartments have been modest and unencumbered. I live in New York City now, in a small condo reminiscent of my tiny cottage, a converted garret in the hills of Northern California, which in turn never ceased to remind me of my old friend's place in Setagaya, where fresh *tatami* infused winter with the scent of spring.

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